

Eco-Yoga for Children:

A new connection based on age old wisdom

By Kate Kazony

As a kindergarten yoga teacher, I learned years ago that fantasy and play are the best drivers for children's engagement. Also that as small children, we have often not completely 'landed' in our bodies until around four years of age. As infants our largest and most active gland is the thymus, which is connected to the vrttis (emotions) of our anahata (heart) chakra.



It was agreed that rather than focus on the personalities, we would focus on the issue - with the aim being to connect children to nature.

Using the Circle of Love curriculum as a framework, we re-explored the large abundant garden. On daily forest walks, from a new focus on each of the tanmatras (space/time, clouds, light and colour, water, rocks and stones), and all, we would go mindfully into nature and

encourage the children to bring their observations back to the class.

Love, hope, effort, discrimination, regret and identity are expressions to nurture within the early years' classes. In this regard, over years of teaching, Grace, a very bright 3-year-old, has always stood out for me.

*Forget not that the earth delights to feel your bare feet
and the winds long to play with your hair.*

— Khalil Gibran

Here is a story of how small Grace helped Yoga find its way from Nature-Kindergarten play to becoming the focus of her classmates.

Grace was still in the mystical realm of cosmic thought. She could sense the stars were with her during the day, and wondered about the feelings of plants. At times the other children frustrated her beyond reason, and she would yell for them to look after the garden worms and flowers (while they laughed and squashed a bug) as she was certain that she knew more than they, and was insistent to teach.



Eventually, the class became divided into those who banded with Grace and those who ignored the developing nature lover's sensibilities. As teachers, it became important to bring something of Grace's inherent awareness to the appreciation of all class members.

These discoveries of new thoughts and feelings were often expressed through drawings, clay or wire sculptures, stories, or put into play.

But Grace was experiencing a different feeling that went beyond the usual outing activities, the splashing in puddles, chasing bush turkeys, jumping over logs, and collecting leaves that often occupied the group.



Fascinated with the forest light, Grace would become so absorbed by the surrounding air and colour that she was drawn into a stillness. I'd gaze behind to find her pausing on a path (while the children had run on ahead), transported by gazing into the speckled leaf canopy, or sometimes double bent over at a puddle, watching reflections while playmates busied themselves collecting sticks for a game around her.

Although she tried when I asked, she was unable to describe what she was feeling. It seemed that she was trying to speak or describe from her heart, and unable to find the right words. Her best attempts were that she felt 'the moon is hiding in the forest', or the 'magic bird was calling'.



It is not so much for its beauty that the forest makes a claim upon men's hearts, as for that subtle something, that quality of air, that emanation from old trees, that so wonderfully changes and renews a weary spirit. —Robert Louis Stevenson

Medical science assumes that the thymus is highly active in childhood because as small babies our need for immunity is paramount. The thymus continues to grow in size and activity until late teens, when it exists at its largest size, approximately 4 grams in weight.

Considering the experiences of childhood - that wonder, discovery, conviction, and enchantment are regularly arising emotions - it is clear that during childhood our hearts are active and open - and highly developed.

How could I honour all that Grace was feeling? It seemed right to explore movement as a description... And easy to do.

Alongside the art area, equipped with dress ups, (coloured cloths and scarves) we created a space on the mat using blocks and blankets that distinguished her 'stage' and she began a series of dance routines that developed over the weeks, connecting to the visits back into the forest.

At first her dancing was predictably based upon twirling ballerina styles that she'd watched others perform, and, as we learnt to stand still in the forest, listen for bird song, mimic the shapes of vines, leaves, and branches we observed, Grace brought these experiences back into the classroom and began incorporating these into her "shows". Sometimes she would make tickets for the class to come and watch her performance, and we would set up chairs like a theatre to observe the event.

Other children began to join her. We extended the play into a forest dance game, where, with flute music the children were able to be wind, trees, and light, and then find a posture to freeze into, where they became an element of the forest.

As these different postures became evident, it was then possible to show the children yoga cards that displayed a similar shape, and instead of taking the name on the yoga card, (for example, child pose or snake pose) we let the children call their postures by their own name. (for the

children, bhujanasana might look like a branch one day or a worm the next).

Photographing the postures, we printing up our own laminated images allowed the class to develop their own set of yoga cards to refer to.

As the children went in and out of the forest, and worked in the garden with plants, worms, and seeds, their body vocabulary expanded, looking for movements and postures that best described what they saw.

Just as the ancient wisdom of yoga began with imitating nature and absorbing the qualities that we find in our landscapes, Grace discovered her own asanas, and was able to inspire a classroom change of attitude and heart through her nature yoga.

The goal of life is to make your heartbeat match the beat of the universe, to match your nature with Nature. — Joseph Campbell



Further Resources:

Kids yoga online: <https://www.cosmickids.com>
Art in nature:
<https://sites.google.com/site/giartistsinfo/andy-goldsworthy/his-work>

Prabhat Samghiita
Song Number 468
27 April 1983, Madhumalaiṅca, Calcutta
By Shrii P. R. Sarkar

We are the daughters of the land of liberation.
Singing and dancing over slopes and hills,
Beside sparkling fountains and streams.
We play the whole day long with kadama and
pulash flowers,
Along lanes lined with shady mahuá trees.
We weave garlands into our hair,
Walking on the meandering forest paths.
The forest deer rejoice to see
Our joyful song and dance.

We are the blessed daughters of Parama Puruṣa*

*cosmic consciousness.